



health

NEWS

December

2008

FREE

PROMOTIONS ARE GOOD FROM 12/01/08 TO 12/31/08

ARM YOURSELF FOR GOOD HEALTH

It's time to plan to protect your health. As students from kindergarten to college are in schools, with lots of people—and germs to catch. One of the best ways to guard you and your family against infectious disease is to stay up-to-date with your vaccines.

Thanks to medical research, many of us have never known the terrible diseases that immunization keeps at bay. Before vaccines, polio paralyzed thousands of children nationwide every year, and measles infected millions. At the turn of the 20th century, diphtheria was one of the most common causes of death in school-age children. Today, these are best known as the names of shots our kids get at the pediatrician's office. Cases of vaccine-preventable diseases have reached an all-time low, according to a recent report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But because we rarely, if ever, see childhood diseases like diphtheria and whooping cough, some people question whether the vaccines are necessary. Others worry about possible links between vaccines and illness. The scientific evidence to date doesn't support such concerns, however, and public health officials agree that the benefits of vaccination far outweigh the risks.

Vaccines prime the body to defend itself against pathogens. Early vaccines contained weakened live pathogens, but most now consist of a part of a pathogen or a crippled pathogen. When you get a vaccine, the immune system goes into action, ramping up production of specialized cells and antibodies to fight what the body sees as an invading pathogen. If the body later encounters the real pathogen, it "remembers" it and quickly gets rid of it. Staying up-to-date on vaccines doesn't just help you. When more people are vaccinated in a population, it's harder for pathogens to spread. Scientists call this the "herd-immunity" effect.

Many vaccines protect us against viruses. Viruses need a host—like the body of a human, animal or plant—to make copies of themselves. Viruses have their own genetic mate-

rial but use the host's cells to multiply. Some viruses constantly change their genetic material, allowing them to evade immune system attack. That's why researchers who create vaccines for seasonal influenza, or "flu," have to make a new flu vaccine each year.

To make effective flu vaccines, researchers pay close attention to how and when the flu virus changes. Dr. Derek J. Smith, an NIH-funded researcher from the University of Cambridge in England, recently developed a new technique, called antigenic cartography, that will help guide vaccine development. It involves testing how strongly thousands of flu strains attach to various human antibodies. This information is then compared to a world map to trace how flu viruses evolve and spread throughout the year.

Smith's team has learned that the most common type of flu starts a predictable, yearly journey in East and South-east Asia, then travels around the world and ends up in South America. In addition to improving the effectiveness of the flu vaccine, Smith says his method may help scientists develop vaccines against some of the world's craftiest and deadliest viruses. "Antigenic cartography should be applicable to other infectious diseases caused by pathogens that change over time, such as hepatitis C, HIV and malaria," he says. Along with improving current vaccines, scientists are also working hard to develop new ones. In 2006, the vaccine Zostavax was approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to protect older adults against shingles, an illness caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. The virus can lay dormant in nerve cells for many years, only to re-emerge years later as a painful, blistering rash. Because shingles pain can be severe and long-lasting, most doctors recommend that older adults get the vaccine. It's not 100% effective at preventing shingles, but can prevent most cases of severe pain.

History has already shown us that immunization is a very successful and cost-effective public health strategy. While new vaccines are in the pipeline, make sure to arm yourself and your children with the ones we already have.

Articles in this publication are compiled from information from: <http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2008/August/feature1.htm>
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KEEPING HANDS CLEAN

Keeping hands clean is one of the most important steps we can take to avoid getting sick and spreading germs to others. It is best to wash your hands with soap and clean running water for 20 seconds. However, if soap and clean water are not available, use an alcohol-based product to clean your hands. Alcohol-based hand rubs significantly reduce the number of germs on skin and are fast acting.

When washing hands with soap and water:

- Wet your hands with clean running water and apply soap. Use warm water if it is available.
- Rub hands together to make a lather and scrub all surfaces. Continue rubbing hands for 20 seconds or imagine singing "Happy Birthday" twice.
- Rinse hands well under running water.
- Dry your hands using a paper towel or air dryer. If possible, use your paper towel to turn off the faucet.

When should you wash your hands?

- Before preparing or eating food
- After going to the bathroom
- After changing diapers or cleaning up a child who has gone to the bathroom
- Before and after tending to someone who is sick
- After blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing
- After handling an animal or animal waste
- After handling garbage
- Before and after treating a cut or wound

Articles in this publication are compiled from information from: <http://www.cdc.gov/cleanhands/>
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